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A

REPLY TO THE STRICTURES
OF THE
MONTHLY REVIEWERS,
IN FEBRUARY, 1777,
ON THE TRAGEDY OF
THE BATTLE OF EDDINGTON.

By J. PENN, Esq.

INCLUDING
BOTH AN ABSTRACT AND SUPPLEMENT OF HIS
CRITICAL WORKS ON THE DRAMA.

Juvat integros accedere fontes.

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A REPLY, &c.

A VERY few years ago it is known to have been the uncontroverted opinion of the generality of dramatic critics, and seemed to be the opinion of all, that, whether from a defect of taste in the audience, or from a want of adequacy to its object in the species of exhibition, the simple tragedy, which confines itself to a single place, and in which the whole of the fable is supposed to take up a portion of time no longer than twenty-four hours, could not, with any hopes of success, be brought upon the English stage. That it was a dull and heavy sort of composition, necessarily deficient in that variety which the drama required, and which was imagined to result very naturally from a transgression of all the unities, except that of action, seemed the character it most frequently bore: nor had any means been suggested of otherwise providing that constant amusement it was thought incapable of producing at the theatre, or of giving

effect to the qualities peculiar to it, of extreme simplicity and perspicuity.

Had this unexpected object been attained alone ; had a play so written been received at the theatres royal with applause, it would evidently deserve to be considered and acknowledged a curious circumstance ; and the critics, who had held this sort of play to be " sacred to sleep," and triumphantly asserted, that it had never succeeded, would be compelled, if they were candid, to own the mistake they were led into in attempting to foresee impossibility of success, and in damping the ardour of enterprise directed towards the improvement of a liberal art.

But the *Battle of Eddington* has not only done this : it has confined its subject, not to twenty-four, but to *two or three* hours. A fictitious action of that length, and in one spot, is supposed (improbably perhaps) a faithful representation of a real one, of the same length, and in one spot ; the portrait is made *strangely* and *unnaturally* like its original. The difficulty of all this is far increased by borrowing no assistance from love, which the *Samson Agonistes* alone, of all our simple plays,

had before refrained from. The trial of its effect was not at the winter theatres, where "the tones of "an actor," or the advantages of good scenery, might recommend it; but, unluckily for the *Monthly Reviewers*, though not "in a barn," yet "by strollers;" and I agree with them, it was the most perfect trial that could be had.* The only reason I could have wished it acted at the winter theatres, is the general prejudice in favour of plays which have been so, and the celebrity which would have been reflected by this on the really just principles upon which it was constructed.

After this work of supererogation, I will not ask the critics for that degree of approbation which has even without it appeared due; but, since something ought to be decided upon, and since the discouragement this tragedy experienced from periodical works and newspapers of all sorts was such, while the support it received from friends was so trifling, if they will say positively, that *nothing* has been done but what had been foreseen by them in the repeated

* The reason why it succeeded is obvious. It is only declamation that depends much upon the tones of an actor; incident employs his thoughts; and hence the worst will often deliver himself pleasingly, because naturally.

applause of an audience; that the favourable reception of the tragedy was *not* contrary to the opinions they had expressed; and that, in short, their notion of the taste of a British audience must *not* appear much less accurate since the performance and publication of the *Battle of Eddington*.

What I have said, in my *Letters on the Drama*, upon the subject of stage effect, seems twisted as much as any thing, so as to place my system in an unfavourable point of view. The caution with which I explained every part, however great, could not be supposed such as to preclude all possibility of erroneous objection; but rather than attribute to it an approbation of frivolous stage effect, the critics ought to perceive its object is to create one of a very different sort, which requires most respectable poetical talents *to excel in*. All that *I* have done is carefully to collect its neglected and misused characters, to give them order and meaning, and to fix them

Ne turbata volent rapidis ludibria ventis.*

To write upon this plan, seems less consulting fri-

* Flitting leaves, the sport of every wind,

Lest they disperse in air our empty fate. DRYDEN.

volous stage effect, than to change the scene during a piece does; which is not only to amuse by decoration without any mental effort, but virtually to confess that we avoid that mental effort, because our imagination or our resolution, is unequal to it.

Favourite maxims and observations are known to give the greatest satisfaction to a British audience. These, it was my plan to transform to classical beauties, like the sentences of Lucan, to have them introduced into the plot with the same judgment as the incidents, and even by adapting them with equal art to the characters, operate materially on the fable. If it is objected, that I am deviating from the true end of tragedy in this, I shall by no means allow it, even upon the principles of the objectors. Johnson observes, in speaking of Dryden's ode, that diamonds cannot string and hold together diamonds. There must be some meaner material made use of for this purpose; and in few of the dramas they could produce, will there be found a considerable number of scenes, highly wrought, whatever boast there may be of regard for the more splendid dramatic qualities. Now it is only the intermediate scenes I would wish any part

of devoted to this stile of writing, unless indeed it could be happily introduced elsewhere. This setting, therefore, may not be less proper to give lustre to dramatic jewels of the first water, than ornaments more precious, and nearer also to their nature, though of ill-according figure and appearance.

But I am far from allowing, that the success of my tragedy has been chiefly promoted, or its original structure chiefly instanced, by the style here spoken of. There is another part of the *setting*, which can never subject the workmanship to like strictures. Supposing, that not one passage had been of this character, yet the reception of the piece would have been very little inferior to what it was. It is by *laying the plot deeper* than any other, that effect has been, for the first time, given to simplicity; and that critics of delicate taste have at length a means of seeing compositions, which possess nothing to them disgusting, obtain the favour of the public. The darts of censure which light upon that part of stage effect (if such it can be called), which results from action, cannot strike it singly, but must pitch likewise upon that natural progress of the fable, which is intimately interwoven with it.

It is by the course of events that situations are produced which form pictures upon the stage, and which are often, too, pictures characterized by pity and terror. Every tragedy must present to the eye a certain number of these pictures; and the question of propriety is only relative to their number. It is even, I take it, by the greater frequency of these, that the English drama has any peculiar advantage, or contributed, in any respect, to the advancement of the art: and this may appear evident on taking a survey of each of the theatres, which have been distinguished by superior genius in tragedy as well as comedy, and have been most probably unequalled by the efforts of every other nation, ancient and modern: I mean the Greek, the French, and the English theatres.

I shall premise, that there are two principles of the human mind, extremely necessary here to be taken into consideration; one of which is the disposition discernible in poets, to take pleasure in the expression of thought by words, from which they may be taxed, like those who are loquacious in conversation, with the love of hearing their own voices; and the other, that dislike of the labour of thought itself, which

is common likewise to them, and people in every situation in life. These principles obviously tend to increase the quantity of declamation, and to diminish that of incident, in a tragedy.

In my notes lately published, on the Treatise of Ranieri di Calsabigi, I have shown the number of scenes in a regular play, to be pretty nearly in proportion to the quantity of action in it. In a former critical work I have surmised, that it might be owing in part to the pomp of theatrical apparatus that the Greek play was well received, though (according to this rule) so very declamatory, and I have found no reason to alter my opinion. Another circumstance might be mentioned too, which is the custom of varying the species of music, from time to time, during the performance, so that a person entering the theatre at any time, would be able to find out, merely from the music, what part of the play was at the time acting. It must be apparent, that the natural heaviness of the Greek drama would by these means be exceedingly relieved, and the exquisite pathos of certain scenes would be waited for without impatience; but though, added to all this, the poet's labour was spared, much, as I

have supposed, to his satisfaction, yet a check was given to improvement in the art, and the inert splendour of the spectacle, co-operating with varied melody, gave premature content to audiences, which, had the same tragedies been represented before them in the modern way, might gradually have made good poets feel the necessity of being obliged only for the effect of their pieces, in future, to the respectable resources of the human mind.

For, indeed, it appears, that when a more natural mode of performing tragedies was established, the French could not otherwise keep up attention at the theatres of Paris, than by increasing the action half as much again, or the scenes from about twenty to above thirty. Even then many attempts were made by Lamotte, and other literati, to discredit and to decry the custom which prevailed of following the example of simplicity the Greeks had set; but the great merit of authors who had pursued that method, the learning, and even the dogmatism which was naturally called forth in support of it, in a country proud of the cultivation of literature, kept alive respect for propriety in the structure of the drama; and happily did so, since Eng-

land was at the same time ensuring to the world those advantages of experiment, for which opposite dramatic opinions prepared the way.*

With the example of Shakspeare before them, the English poets had but little motive to court restraint. They nevertheless increased the action of the drama, on discovering an easy method. Reason presently suggested to those who might still indulge their natural repugnance to labour, that additional variety being readily attainable, was also desirable. They changed the scene, in the course of a play, to any distant place, where an interesting action, connected with the subject, might be represented, and by these means became more habitually attentive to the employment of *shewing*, than that of *describing*, what was done. One consequence of this was, by shortening the speeches, to call off the eyes of the spectators as little as possible, from what was passing; and a very striking difference between the English and French theatres, which marks the improvement in the drama owing to the former, is a

* May their political experiments, for still stronger reasons, be opposite!

superiority in the number of its scenes of nearly half those of the latter. It is not our custom of violating the rules of Aristotle, but these circumstances incident to it, of which we have any just reason to boast. The change of scene may be compared to the display of that inert theatrical pageantry, which satisfies an audience without expence of thought; and which has been mentioned as a probable reason why the drama at Athens did not advance more rapidly towards perfection.

Few hints had been given, till of late years, for making in this art the improvement which was necessary. There is nothing in the works of the ancients that points more towards it than those lines of Horace;

Segnius irritant animos demissa per aures

Quam quæ sunt oculis subjecta fidelibus.*

Dr. Warton, in slightly glancing at the subject of the drama, has dropped a sentiment favourable to it, where, condemning the declamation of the French, he speaks of *action*, as what ought to be

* Cold is the tale——

Filling the soul with less dismay and fear,

Than where spectators view, like standers by,

The deed, &c.

relied upon by the poet in preference. Voltaire, who knew its general nature, and who loved tragedy, if possible, better than deism, might perhaps have exhibited it to the world, had he had a British audience to direct him: but though the question seems to have been agitated in France, whether the drama, which professes to represent the actions of men, ought not to be more sparing of the verbal expression of sentiments, Marmontel determines it in the negative. The French critics, whose good sense deserves praise, seemed apprehensive, before the experiment was made, that poetry and rational composition could no longer have place in works of this sort, and that such new performances must exclusively take possession of their stage, as we find prevail upon ours; though, as I have shown lately, their almost exclusive prevalence is not owing to their authors, who, however they may deserve little praise, have not deserved discouragement.

For by their steady rejection of rule, they have been at liberty to fish out and discover the taste of an audience; and this, especially with a full gallery, I shall ever contend to be the taste of nature. Let us only observe what has been esteemed pro-

priety in common conversation, and reason from analogy ; we shall see, that what is first desired in a companion, is an union of the strictest good sense, with the gayest and most agreeable temper. In him there is nothing to perplex our choice ; but how will it be if the alternative be to assort either with the serious talker, who rounds his periods well, and shews sense, but is determined, in spite of the company, to be its orator ; and the thoughtless buffoon, who is good humoured and accommodating, without any natural strength of mind ? I do not doubt that, after a pause, even the puns of one will be preferred in mixed company, to the arguments of the other. I have always, upon this principle, been surprized, that the most flimsy farce, which promotes good humour at the theatre, to which people go so professedly for amusement, should not be preferred there to a heavy play, the production of which required much greater powers. That it is the taste of nature, may be inferred too from its long continuance. False taste in manners, and in literature, is of short duration ; but the propensity of an audience to receive pleasure from dramatic works erring against the rules of criticism yet possessing effect, is not grown weaker

since the days of Dryden, or even of Shakespeare ; and how consistent this is with the disapprobation of every thinking man who judges of many of those works as productions of human genius, is pointed out in my notes to the translation of Rannieri di Calsibigi's essay.

This ingenious critic has thrown more light than any other person, upon the improvement of which the drama stands in need. I was immediately struck by his idea, that a tragedy ought to be " a series of pictures (pictures which will restrain the conversation to that small quantity which is indispensably necessary to characterize the persons, and to conduct them into those picturesque situations, which strike and affect the minds of spectators)." Frequent attendance at the theatre after the perusal of this treatise, enabled me to form a clear idea of the means necessary to produce such a tragedy ; which I did ; and the novelty of it is demonstrably proved by the extraordinary number of the scenes, which is proportionate to the extraordinary number of the incidents. It must be evident from this, that what I have mentioned as the real improvement of the drama due to this country, did not result from a rejection of critical

rules ; for the Battle of Eddington plainly proves, that change of scene is by no means necessary to enrich a tragedy with incidents, and makes it obviously proper to say to the poet "*quod petis hic est ;*"* and to warn him that it is acting more suitably to his character, as a poet, to exercise his imagination than his memory.

I think it natural that some people of general good taste should here make two remarks.

The first is : has not quantity of incidents been sometimes censured as a departure from simplicity ? how then can it be praised where simplicity is also praised ? I answer, that by means of duplicity of plot, irregularity of conduct, and change of scene, incidents may have appeared too numerous, and have been so with those assistances to confusion and perplexity ; but I doubt whether, if a drama, the fullest of incidents, had closely adhered to all the unities, it could ever have appeared the worse for their number. Such dramas may exist, but have not existed hitherto.

The second is : must not a style of writing, marked with a degree of pathos, employed in unfolding characters, and though dwelling somewhat

* What you seek is here.

at length upon subjects, yet rendered delightful to the reader by beautiful poetry, be banished finally from the tragic drama?—I answer, yes; but this is the mere twilight of pathos; and a lustre, artificial, though equally agreeable to reason and nature, must be called in, to direct our eyes with certainty towards the objects presented to us. It may here be said, “I will not then shut out a light so much
“to my taste; nor forego the pleasure of contem-
“plating this season of calmness; ’tis then

“ ——— the pleasant time,
“The cool, the silent, save where silence yields
“To the night-warbling bird, that now awake
“Tunes sweetest his *love*-laboured song.”

I answer again, the leaning expressed towards this calmness, or this sober melody, seems to argue *general* good taste; but like it for what it is, and do not pretend to discover in it a striking splendour, nor to see clearer in the dusky air. It is only the intenser pathos that has any thing dramatic in its character; and that which I contend prevails too much in tragedy, however soothing, is only of an elegiac temper. Those pathetic parts of their dramas where our poets “*bigber* sung,” I think

deserving of the highest praise; but instead of the rest, it cannot be thought unworthy of the greatest poets, to substitute a happy combination of well-imagined incidents, which, with the help of beauty and propriety of language, would give the utmost force to the strokes of nature which may be scattered over their tragedies.

It will be now I think acknowledged, that the Battle of Eddington cannot be rated, as the Monthly Reviewers rate it, below *the critical work which it accompanies*. To start a doubt concerning the justness of an universal opinion, such as was this, of the want of theatrical effect necessarily attached to Greek simplicity, may, considered abstractedly, indicate a love of singularity; to give good reasons in doing so, for entertaining that doubt, must prevent such an imputation; but by patient labour to produce, at the same time, an example to prove that the opinion was formed hastily, must be allowed both a greater mental and moral exertion. Nor does the phenomenon only exist, but a reason is given why it should be equal to the effects ascribed to it. The Battle of Eddington, which has succeeded in a more complete manner than other

simple plays, shews a difference of structure proportionate to, and explanatory of, the difference of its reception. I was not likely to engage in a controversy on this point, till I could rest my arguments on demonstration; and though the managers, by *standing firm*, may withhold awhile an interesting piece of knowledge from many lovers of dramatic poetry, yet this play will at length, I doubt not, be esteemed curious, because a single instance of one exactly filled with action, in which whatever is superfluous in language is lopped off, and whatever is deficient in subject supplied. The scenes of the ancient tragedy revived, amount, upon an average, to thirty-five; those of the English play to forty-five; and those of the Battle of Eddington to sixty-three. This extraordinary number is the necessary consequence of a deep-laid plot, such as it must be clear the nature of tragedy requires. I know nothing more satisfactory to me in this discovery, than the method it points out to the man of taste and education, of rendering his respectable compositions (even where the unities are violated) as pleasing to every part of an audience, as pieces destitute of merit, which are tolerated for the sake of the spectacle. If such a person

wish to know how his tragedy will be received, let him cast his eye over it. If he find it broken into scenes, to the degree here recommended, it is very well: otherwise he must add and interweave more incidents into it; for a tragedy formed upon the principles of the *Battle of Eddington*, is, to the same person, and done in the same manner, twice the labour of one formed upon those of any that has existed. But it is surely better for such a person to produce one tragedy that will gain him universal applause, than two, that will be at all neglected; and it is better likewise for the public, that compositions, in which good sense, and some vigour, are perceivable, should occasionally take place of such as are frequently performed, and are devoid of any. It may be said here, as Mrs. Montague very justly observes, that, "that is the easiest part of every art perhaps (but in poetry without dispute) in which the connoisseur can direct the artist." This is a true character of the mechanical part of dramatic poetry; but the Monthly Reviewers may recollect, good critics also allow that mechanical beauties give praise to the inventor, and the *Battle of Eddington* has *created* those

rules, to which it has been singular in its adherence. Whether they will think that union of perspicuity and force, which these rules communicate to the action, an advantage, I cannot say: this is incontestible, that in the instance where they are observed, if not by their means, the gallery have on a sudden become the loudest in their applause of a play, subjected to more rigid rules than Aristotle's; and the literati, who did not in general conceive this possible, may see reason to incline less to theory, and more to practice. Nor is too great a value set, in this public offering, on the base nature of stage-effect; which is attempted only to be made current by its admixture, in a just proportion, with the pure ore of mental exertion. I may not, in my building, have shown the happiest talent of combining classical and beautiful forms, but I have discovered such beauties to be in general separated by too much *dead wall*, and have hit luckily upon the right method of breaking it at intervals, and throwing the just degree of light and shade upon the complete front; so that the effect is wrought, not by deviating from, but giving characteristic spirit to simplicity and unity. Let us only consi-

der, with this mechanical help, what a transcendant and unrivalled creation a tragedy of Shakespeare's might have been, confined to the few hours in which Duncan's murder is planned and executed. Suppose that he had arrived late at night, that the murder had ensued, that the company had been alarmed by it very early; and that an immediate punishment of the guilty had instanced the observance of poetical justice. That Shakespeare could not (as reflection has taught me to think he could) have provided situations, in this case, as striking as any even in the play of Macbeth, can only be affirmed by those whose genius is as comprehensive as Shakespeare's was. This we must all allow, that in such a drama the mind is led more easily, and with less reflection, to seize what follows in the order of time; and that a series of events, equally interesting, must rush upon it with an irresistible force.

One may infer from the above general reasoning, that the Greek and French plays might be adapted to the taste of an English audience, and become more truly dramatic, if they were reduced with judgment in a contrary proportion to the number of their scenes. For instance, the usual

number of scenes in a tragedy of the common length, properly filled, being between sixty and seventy, the Greek play, which has twenty more or less, might be reduced to about one-third of its present length; and the French play, being thirty-five, to near one half. But these plays so reduced, when represented, would then have that advantage of brilliant taste and perspicuity, which only Mr. Mason's plays, and some others of our own, could, by a similar process, be made to exhibit on the stage.* In the two last paragraphs of my Letters on the Drama I had not yet perceived very strong reasons for numbering both the scenes and the lines, which I should certainly always do in future; for it is by the proportion which the former bears to the latter, that the degree of action may be determined. If the manager finds a play read decently, and perceives that the scenes are to the lines nearly as sixty-five to fifteen hundred, it will most probably be an animated spectacle. If the former bears a much larger proportion to the latter, the incidents would not have their true and natural play.

* Even Mr. Mason's *golden clouds* ought, at such times, to undergo a temporary dispersion, to give force to his *golden sun*.

One consequence of dwelling with such an appearance of exactness upon the nature of this improvement, may, I hope, be that attention which its universal use seems to merit ; for it is *κτῆμα εἰς αἰετ* ; a lasting acquisition (as far as it goes) to all nations equally ; and not more calculated to purify the drama of this country, than to invigorate that of France and Italy.

The Monthly Reviewers have taken up this subject, in their last strictures upon the *Battle of Edington*, with that natural degree of prejudice, which promises to the world an accession of new light, struck out by the collision of opposite opinions. Their character of the poetical and dramatic spirit prevailing in the piece, I shall not very much at length contest ; but confine myself to certain remarks, and chiefly such as may tend to elucidate my system. I have long observed, and attributed to the declension of simplicity of taste, as well as to other prejudices co-operating with it, the character which marks many decisions of modern critics on poetical compositions, and has perhaps, greatly tended to create a species of poetical style which lately received a check from the

severity of satire. The nature of this style was then too well described in poetry for me now to attempt it.* The cause, of it, however may in part be traced to a contempt of those sterling qualities of good sense, simplicity, and correctness, which, while they appear infinitely heightened in the great father of poetry, still ought to be allowed uncommon attractions in the writings of Virgil and of Terence. Praise is due to Johnson for his originality in observing, that it by no means followed, because judgment was great, that genius should necessarily be small; nor the reverse: for there seemed to have prevailed an opinion, that the two qualities, like two buckets in a well, always acted contrarywise. In like manner, thought and expression, fancy and correctness, seem supposed eternally at variance. These notions may

* The original part of the satire alluded to, is where that particular confusion of style is minutely described, which seems owing chiefly to the bad taste imbibed from books. In the rest, *doggerel*, *jargon*, *pastoral insipidity*, and other faults are satirized, which are not *injurious* to taste, though they should appear, and may consist with good but inactive judgment, as being the offspring of haste.

have influenced many criticisms I have seen; in which a faltering verse has perhaps jogged the critic out of his accustomed spleen, and delighted him at the same time with the supposed means it offered, of displaying both his benevolence and judgment, in lenity towards failing, as in itself a sufficient, and even the only, test of inborn excellence. I have, however, proceeded resolutely to correct, and aimed at propriety, in spite of these prejudices; though I think it not improbable, that deficient in merit as may be found the lyric parts of the *Battle of Eddington*, they may still, sometimes, owing to these causes, have been under-rated.

Judgments formed of dramatic, as well as poetical excellence, may possibly, at the present day, be sometimes marked with error. It appears to me, that in general, English critics in tragedy too much

make the whole depend upon a part.

They are properly most struck by those brilliant passages, of which, perhaps, instances are only to be found in the Greek and the English poets; and where the language of nature and of passion in a single situation, has so power-

ful an effect upon the mind. But there are qualities that, possessed in the highest degree, may confer praise beyond those which they require, in one somewhat inferior. The conduct of the fable, which Mr. Mason, in his Letters on Elfrida, speaks of as deserving greater attention, and which the French have much excelled in, must require fertility of imagination, in order to conceive a series of closely connected incidents, not only sufficiently natural to support a tragedy, but sufficiently striking to shew the skill of a master. And the end of tragedy is equally kept in view by an artful plot, as by happily imagined situations, provided the object be, in both cases, to affect, in the sense used by Bishop Hurd, or "not to affect, but to affect in the most pleasing manner," in the sense I used it in my Fifth Letter on the Drama; meaning thereby to distinguish the overpowering sensations commonly excited by private distress, from those truly tragic ones, which are in part produced by circumstances incidental to the misfortunes of the great. It will be easily seen when the poet is verging too far to the other extreme of admiration; but this ought not rashly to be attributed to him, no more than to the painter,

who, in representing some grand historical event, should value himself as much on the relief given to the different groupes, as on the preservation of the costume, by introducing marked and striking objects peculiar to the scene ; so long as he made those objects either assistant, or decidedly subordinate, to the general design. His *mathematical* attachment, too, to the strict rules derived from ancient works, may be as useful to him in *pourtraying the passions*, as it was to Raphael.

But I have conceived, in truth, that though sensible critics may have written who will never be rivalled, yet that even they had not attained a perfect knowledge of the nature of the drama ; for that none of any note had deigned to consider it so far as it related to practice. All, however opposite their opinions, have praised or condemned according to their respective theories ; and even represented attempts to please a whole audience, as an unworthy condescension in a poet. Yet surely there cannot be a more irrational supposition, than that any work of man *ought* to be ill-calculated for the purposes for which it was designed. A conviction of this, discovered to me in a tragedy, a

greater task than it has been commonly supposed; and in attempting to do that part which had not been before undertaken, it is not wonderful that I should have somewhat neglected that which had. I had besides, another reason for giving a *common* air to the language and flow of the verse; and while I was in effect taking great pains with the plot, I conceived it would be generally attractive, to drop, in the usual careless manner, upon sentiments, and recall to mind compositions the least *incumbered* with thought. Still, however, I hoped that my tragedy would be considered, by judges, like a statue purposely deficient in the half tints, and even still bearing the marks of the chisel, only that it might attain its effect at a distance, where the populace could contemplate it. Nor have I had much more reason to complain, than that it could not be judged of with the advantages that were expected to recommend it. I, in another place, took notice of the prejudices of the winter managers. As I thought, with the Italian critic above quoted, that it was "impossible to compose a tragedy by guess, without experiment," to write and bring mine upon the stage, were one and the same thing; yet, in spite of this,

and though I esteem, in truth, the experiment made (for the public good) at the Haymarket, a memorable one, as opening the door at once to chastity of dramatic composition, yet ridicule was cast upon the expence it put me to, no doubt as so much more ruinous, and less sagaciously incurred, than what arises from electioneering, or games of hazard. I had little encouragement from those who, having made up their mind upon the subject, had formed determinate ideas of the drama from an imperfect consideration of its nature, and whose literary turn confirmed their favourite prejudices. Even those whose extensive knowledge and sound judgment had enabled them to consult and understand the best models, ancient and modern, may, from having formed rather a systematic notion of dramatic style and manner, have revolted at the novelty of the work, as a whole. But I recollect a difference of opinion in these judges, when they saw it, as they would a statue, raised to a niche, though not sufficiently distant. When the play was performed, and they had not to contemplate the language, as it appeared in print, but had their attention drawn off by objects presented to the eyes, (which ought to be

principal in a tragedy), they felt and acknowledged the effect of that *body of incident*, which was for the first time sufficient to support one; and which at once avoided the confusion, and produced the variety of the irregular drama. They perceived then, that it was not those faint gleams of dramatic talent, that the Monthly Reviewers are most indulgent to, that were the most valuable part of the piece; but that the plot was its principal merit; in which there was to be found, in many respects, an unequalled portion of the labour of art. Besides instances which may be collected from what I have said elsewhere, I will mention one in the use made of the odes to carry on the plot, whereas the ancients were content with advising that they should not be unconnected with the main story. Those parts too, which were intended to produce an effect, by means of more dramatic situations, are of equal use in carrying on the plot.

But on the other hand, among the judges originally favourable, I have thought I had many who were amply enlightened by nature; and in the first place, gentlemen of education and strength of mind, who having, since their youth, devoted little

time to the cultivation of literature, had acquired no literary prejudices, and taking up the book, or attending the performance, perhaps as a relaxation from business, were, on many accounts, prepared to penetrate into the texture of the fable, and estimate its component parts. Secondly, I have been particularly favoured by the gallery, and that, as I have proved, independent of stage effect, and by the genuine, unimpeachable method of rejecting verbosity; concerning the merit of originality in which mode, let those speak, who judge from other principles than the *gout de comparaison*. I do not know how far fashionable singularity in dramatic matters may be carried, or whether it is no longer allowed proper, to conclude a tragedy with a grand spectacle enforcing the character of the catastrophe, as in the *Rodogune* of Corneille; but I am persuaded something of this is done in the last scene of the *Battle of Eddington*, where, after every political topic has been glanced at during the play, which awakens the enthusiasm of all persons who think they love the constitution, Alfred is exhibited to the English people, as having just gained the decisive victory over the Danes, to which they

are indebted for that constitution; as leading his family out of a hovel, in order to inhabit a palace; and as pointing out to his followers the happy change in the situation of all orders, as well as solemnly assuring them of his intention of engaging in his grand work. His numerous auditors, consisting of English, Scotch, Welch, and Irish, each well distinguished by a national dress, might produce an interesting and characteristic, if not a picturesque and striking effect.

In their criticism on the Letters on the Drama, the Monthly Reviewers represent them as liable to the imputation of "talking about it and about it;" though, to be sure, so new and comprehensive a system, explained in much less than a hundred pages, can scarcely answer to such a description. They honour me likewise, by comparing small things with great, in remarking faults which the Letters had, in common with the Greek critics. If they allude to the treatise which is most in point, the poetics of Aristotle, I cannot but think what has been considered as a mere summary, and little more than the heads of a critical work, must, with equal impropriety, be said to "talk about it and

"about it." A person who thought otherwise, might naturally set about the abridgment of an index. As to concatenation of ideas and precision, they are real, and as evident as the copiousness of the subject would permit. The order, which is the result of reflection, is exactly such as I should still prefer, to explain my general opinions to the reader; nor do I know any position, or sentence, which an union of knowledge, and the attention necessary to understand it, would not prove to have a very determinate meaning.

The doctrine of dramatic deception, though, I believe, rejected by the greatest part of writers, is more natural to conceive, than the recipe to make a poet by making a convert to it, on account of the *manifest* tendency of a belief in it to increase the powers of fancy in dramatic composition. But this seems suitable to the prevailing idea of the small value of common sense and right reason in poetry. Yet, though the observation is true, that an enlightened age sets a greater value upon the finer strokes of imagination, than an adherence to the rules of composition, it does not upon a departure from those rules, simply considered; nor should

it be to flatter the vanity of the poet, but to please ourselves, that we read his work. The literary epicure, who sits down to one of the feasts of reason, may be disposed to admire the skill of the cook; but he will curse him for a coxcomb, if he finds it owing to his self-sufficiency that he is ill and uncomfortably served.

I am not at all staggered by the adherence of the Monthly Reviewers to their opinion of tragicomedy, either as to what respects plot, or temper of mind. Duplicity of plot in the drama, may be compared to *duplicity of gesture*, in public speaking, such as it appeared in the Roman orator Curius, who waved his body from one side to the other; or as it has appeared in some modern orator, when he could not speak without pulling about his hat; in which cases, an affected motion of the limbs or body has been superadded to the natural one. They are both ungraceful and inelegant, and yet both useful to those who resort to them; for one is assistant in the production of incidents, as the other is in the production of arguments; and I have shewn quantity of incident to be as essential in tragedy, as quantity of argument can be in ora-

tory. Both ought equally to be condemned in themselves; and yet we should regret them if we were to lose, at the same time, the fruit of those talents they have been effectual in calling forth. In like manner, dramas composed both of tragic and comic scenes, are only to be defended by the degree of genius which they possess. If any one has at the beginning assumed a tragic tone, and a comic part succeeds, if that ceases before the conclusion of it, the *tragicum spirans* is quite forgotten in the poet, and we are employed too much in recollecting him, to be completely interested afterwards. Sufficient reasons have been given to recommend dramatic simplicity; but what is equal to innumerable *reasons*, is this *fact*, that a method is at length pointed out, for their obtaining general favour; by the help of which, if bad taste has formerly prevailed in criticism, good taste, no doubt, in future, will; nor do I think the managers will be long able to reject a form of play against which they are prejudiced, upon the old plea of its unfitness for stage representation.

I have said nothing above upon the rational introduction of music, on which I dwelt in the criti-

cal works I have already published ; because it is not so likely, as the due construction of a simple drama, to attract general attention when the experiment is made. Neither did the notion I had conceived of it cost any, and still less equal, time and labour ; for the first idea of it occurred to me many years before I made the drama my particular study, and when, after lectures on the Greek tragedians at the university, I was accustomed to attend the opera during the vacations. My subsequent reading and observation have only confirmed me in the opinions I then imperfectly formed.

It cannot be said I have cajoled any critic or person into an agreement with me in these different opinions ; since I have taken every fair means, by refraining from such conduct, of provoking objection, and piquing prejudice, in order to subject my system to the severest trial. The same desire of making a curious experiment by its publicity, and no wish of becoming my own panegyrist, may appear to have occasioned the claims I lay of any share of that merit, in the *Battle of Eddington*, which the Monthly Reviewers disallow, as well as a few additional remarks now in explanation of it.

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That they would *rescind* their unfavourable character of the poetry, I never could presume to think; for though I should differ from them at all on that point, I have rested all claims on demonstration; but they must rescind their character of the play as a *heavy* play (according to the usual acceptation of the term), because it is altered in a second edition, so as to become one no longer; and they, and many other critics, may see reason for allowing that it has put an end to one objection against the regular drama, namely, the want of variety usually experienced by an audience in its representation. If it should be possible that this play, though justice were done in the acting, and management of it, would ever displease a numerous one, consisting of people of all ranks; yet the principles upon which it is formed, are a new discovered spell, to secure others who are but a little more expert than myself in the use of it. It must be considered, that I have endeavoured, not so much at composing a *tragedy*, as at perfecting the form, and pointing out the nature, of *tragedy*. But the piece in which I have done this, will at length, and would now, I have the greatest reason to think, be allowed that portion of

value which utility confers, were utility in this instance, known as clearly as it is in general sought ardently. The prejudice which prevents its appearance at the winter theatres, forbids likewise, the pleasure an audience would take in listening to sentiments, in which almost all the topics interesting to them as Englishmen, are, by a good deal of fair labour, brought together; and in witnessing the representation on the stage, of an event in our history, naturally heightened, which gives beyond all others to the natives of these islands, reasons for just exultation.

If any resemblance is, on these accounts, remarked in it, to those dramas which rely on the snares they lay for applause, I ask how the comparison will hold good, when it is seen to adhere more invariably to the rules, whether allowed real or imaginary, of rational composition, than any former tragedy? It is true, that the same means are resorted to, though divested of what made them blameable, of attracting attention; and owing too to that circumstance, the success of this new mode could not much more discredit them, but only institute a fair competition, in preventing

their almost total monopoly of the stage. However, carefully, in a work of this sort, to guard against any splendour in the spectacle, or any aptness of allusion in the dialogue, which naturally offers itself, is no more praiseworthy, than to aim at the effect of introducing actors, with only part of their cloathes on. Nature in this, as in other respects, is the proper guide. All that I regret, in following example, is, that I adopted too much in some places, that usual carelessness of style, approaching to baldness, and in attending to dramatic, too much overlooked poetical effect; for I am now convinced, *action* would have attained every end I could desire. It is by this, that the scenes are not only made to carry on the plot, but possess a separate consequence, just as much as change of scene from Europe to Asia and back again, could ever give. For I in vain search with the Monthly Reviewers in the Gothic drama for those gigantic efforts, and that grandeur of energy which they perceive; and it seems to me like searching for a needle in hay. Were only the most interesting point of time in all the situations it presents to employ the poet, an evident advantage must accrue; for there may be those who mistake smoke for fire. The

true English Gothic, in the drama, as in architecture, is to be looked for only in England, where it is confined to the plays of Shakespeare, being only made delightful by his genius, while indeed it does little honour to his judgment. In the German play of the *Robbers*, the characters are drawn with spirit; but this merit is fully discovered towards the beginning, before its frequent changes of scene, and plainly existed independent of them. The Monthly Reviewers themselves, observe in the play of *Fiesco*, that "the interest is not always on the encrease," (which does not do particular honour to this species of drama,) and the *Robbers* seems as little to defy criticism, for the nature, the delicacy, and the terror unmixed with horror, of its situations. Among other instances of its finding no advantage in the liberty it is allowed, may be mentioned, the interest not increasing sufficiently towards the end. This has always struck me as very natural, and proved so, not only by the falling off of many modern plays towards the conclusion, when a poet becomes tired of the work he has in hand, but by the remark even of the oldest critic *, who thereby shews nature to have been the same

* πολλοί δὲ πλεῖστοις ἐν, λυέσι κακῶς.

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in all countries, and in all ages. Though, however, these circumstances but little recommend the Gothic drama, I would rather have the critic, in general, lay much stress upon them, than the poet, who ought to be allowed every liberty he thinks necessary, provided only his compositions possess merit.

I think, after the above observations, the question will appear reduced within a narrow compass, and *some degree* of value may attach to the *Battle of Eddington*, on one of two accounts; for,

Either it had more poetry to support it in a successful representation, than the Monthly Reviewers allow:

Or, not having more, it deserved praise for judgment in the construction of its plot, (which could thus alone procure it success contrary to the universal opinion,) EXACTLY IN THE SAME PROPORTION AS THE POETRY WAS DEFECTIVE.



